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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3409

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000387

SENSITIVE

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STATE FOR PRM/ANE MEGHANN CURTIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREF PGOV PTER PHUM SOCI IN CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKAN REFUGEES STILL ARRIVING, POST RECOMMENDS PRM ASSISTANCE IN FY09

REFS: A) CHENNAI 364 B) CHENNAI 362 C) CHENNAI 051

¶11. (U) This is an action request. See paragraphs 12 and 13.

¶12. (SBU) Summary: The recent escalation of Sri Lanka's war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has not resulted in the expected flood of new refugees to India. Nonetheless, refugees continue to arrive at a steady, but modest pace. Recent visitors to the refugee camps confirm post's January 2008 assessment that at least some camps suffer deficiencies, particularly in terms of water and sanitation. Attention to the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils remains extremely high in Tamil Nadu. Mission India strongly recommends that PRM allocate FY09 assistance funds for Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu. Doing so will encourage India to continue its recent openness to assistance and inquiries about this refugee community, as well as serve our common counter-terrorism goal of denying the Tamil Tigers potential recruits. End summary.

Modest refugee flow continues, but no flood

¶13. (U) The Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR), which compiles the most reliable figures for Sri Lankan refugee arrivals, told post that 2,394 refugees arrived in Tamil Nadu from January 1 through October 31, 2008. These arrivals continue at a steady, but modest pace. OfERR's monthly breakdown of 2008 arrivals follows:

January	145
February	159
March	233
April	233
May	556
June	228
July	261
August	115
September	265
October	199

¶14. (SBU) By historical standards, the current refugee flow is modest. For example, more than 10,000 refugees arrived in a period of just three months in 2006. The current rate of arrivals runs counter to recent fears that the intensification of the conflict in northern Sri Lanka would lead to a flood of refugees to India. Our interlocutors attribute the failure of the flood to materialize to a variety of factors. Many tell us that both the Sri Lankan Navy and the Tamil Tigers prevent potential refugees from crossing to India. On the Indian side, the Coast Guard has stepped up its patrols in coastal waters. There are also reports that law enforcement authorities are more regularly punishing boat operators for transporting refugees, providing a significant deterrent to the refugee traffic.

Conditions concern visiting bishops; state welcomes help

15. (SBU) With more than 73,000 Sri Lankan refugees spread out over 115 camps throughout Tamil Nadu (which is approximately the size of Greece), it is difficult to generalize about their living conditions. As we saw first-hand in January 2008, conditions can vary quite dramatically from camp to camp but it is evident that at least some camps suffer substantial water and sanitation deficiencies (ref C).

16. (SBU) After visiting six refugee camps in October 2008, representatives of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) confirmed our January 2008 assessment. They expressed grave concerns about water and sanitation, as well as the quality of the housing for refugees. Of the six camps the bishops visited, one was Naranammalpuram camp in Tirunelveli district which a November 19 newspaper article described as "unhygienic," adding that "basic sanitation is a distant reality in the camp." The article noted that the camp's 830 residents share just 13 toilets and that "the appalling state of the toilets has increased open defecation in the camp."

17. (SBU) The USCCB delegation reported the findings of their visit to the six camps to Consulate staff and a mid-level official from the Commissionerate of Rehabilitation, which oversees the state's efforts to assist Sri Lankan refugees. The official acknowledged that despite the state's efforts to provide for the refugees, more could be done to improve the basic facilities available to them. He emphasized the central government's policy that the refugee situation is "temporary" (despite the population having been in India for more than twenty years) limits the state government's ability to improve conditions at the camps. In light of this limitation and the substantial unmet needs in the camps, the

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official said the state would welcome further U.S. government assistance to improve conditions.

Tamil Nadu eyes trained firmly on Sri Lanka

18. (SBU) The Sri Lankan Army's continued offensive north into the Tamil Tigers' stronghold, and the associated casualties and displacement of Sri Lankan Tamil civilians, have caused serious concern in Tamil Nadu. Although the political crisis created by the threatened resignations of Tamil Nadu's Members of Parliament has passed (refs A and B), public attention remains fixed on events in the island nation. Interlocutors regularly mention the inflammatory pro-Tamil Tiger DVD that has been circulating around Tamil Nadu (ref b) with its recurring loop of images of Sri Lankan planes bombing villages and bloodied women and children.

19. (SBU) The local media closely chronicles the Sri Lankan Army's offensives, as well as the almost daily stream of public events throughout Tamil Nadu that highlight the state's continued support for the Sri Lankan Tamils' cause. Political and civil society leaders are engaged, but more significant is the steady drumbeat of support from the influential Tamil film industry. The industry's biggest stars have held high-profile hunger strikes and cancelled celebrations to express their solidarity with the Sri Lankan Tamils. The movie industry's involvement keeps public attention fixated on the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils.

Attention on Sri Lanka stokes fears
of increased radicalization of refugees

10. (SBU) Contacts that interact regularly with the refugees worry that news of the intensified hostilities in Sri Lanka could fuel sympathy for the Tamil Tigers. SC Chandrahasan, OfERR's founder and a refugee himself, said the refugees worry about the effects of Sri Lanka's military offensives into the Tiger's northern stronghold. He mentioned some refugees heeded the call by Tamil Nadu's political parties to stage hunger strikes to protest the war, which was notable as the refugees generally steer clear of political activities.

¶11. (SBU) An ardent opponent of the Tamil Tigers, Chandrahasan expressed concern that continued images of Tamil casualties of Sri Lanka's war of "Sinhala chauvinism" may radicalize some refugees -- especially young people -- making them susceptible to recruitment by the Tigers. (Note: Chandrahasan is a pacifist committed to keeping the refugee community free of Tamil Tiger influence. Although he ultimately expressed optimism that the refugees will continue to steer clear of radicalism, he seemed more concerned about it than at any point in the past decade. End note.) Representatives of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) were more pessimistic. They told us that publicity over the recent escalation in violence in Sri Lanka, coupled with poor living conditions at some camps, have made many young refugees potential targets for recruitment by the Tamil Tigers.

Action request: Post recommends FY09 PRM funding for Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu

¶12. (SBU) Mission India strongly recommends that PRM allocate FY09 assistance funds for Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu. Doing so will leverage the momentum built by PRM's FY08 USD 875,000 project, the first-ever on behalf of this refugee population. India's openness to U.S. assistance in this area was hard-won: for years it would not even permit U.S. government visitors to the camps and it still refuses to allow visits by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR). The local government officials critical to successful implementation are entrepreneurial, especially by Indian bureaucratic standards, and eager for our assistance.

¶13. (SBU) Funding in FY09, however modest, will send the right signal: that we care about this vulnerable refugee population, which is all the more important at a time when attention to the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils is at a decades-long high here in Tamil Nadu. Continued funding will also advance key U.S.-India counter-terrorism goals of combating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which both nations long ago designated as a terrorist organization. By working to improve conditions in the camps, we will help reduce the chances of the Tamil Tigers successfully recruiting Sri Lankan refugees as future terrorists.

¶14. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi.

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